

# William Johnson House

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Natchez National Historical Park  
Mississippi



## The “Barber of Natchez”



**Businessman,  
Patriarch, Diarist,  
and Slaveowner**

The commercial district of antebellum Natchez bustled with activity. The sounds of carriages, villagers, steamboats and livestock created a constant clamor. Streets that were alternately muddy or dusty were lined with hotels, churches, shops, and houses. Among the buildings located on State Street was a two-family brick structure that contained both rented retail shop space and the home of the William Johnson family. Johnson rose from slavery to a position of middle-class prosperity during the heyday of the cotton kingdom economic boom. He hunted, gambled, bartered, picnicked with his family and recorded these events in an extensive journal. Although Johnson reaped the material benefits of his economic success, he still walked a fine line between the full rights of a white citizen and the bondage of slavery.

### From Slave to Master

William Johnson was born the son of a mulatto slave woman in 1809. At the age of eleven, William was emancipated by his white slaveowner, also named William Johnson, who is presumed to be his father. The boy's mother Amy and sister Adelia had been freed at an earlier date. James Miller, a free black barber, trained young William as an apprentice.

Following completion of his training, Johnson purchased his first barbershop in Natchez in 1830. He would eventually own and operate three barbershops and a bath house in the city. Clients

received services from Johnson himself, from free blacks hired by Johnson, from apprentices, and from slaves owned by Johnson.

State laws concerning property ownership did not prohibit any free person from owning slaves, even if that person had formerly been a slave. In Johnson's world, slaveownership was a signal of economic and social status. By reaching a certain level of financial success, Johnson was able to purchase slaves and profit from slave labor in his business, in his farm lands, and in his family's home.

### A Record of Daily Life

William Johnson married Ann Battles, a free woman of color, and raised ten children in their home on State Street. In addition to managing his business affairs, Johnson spent free time enjoying hunting and fishing trips, buying and selling goods at local auctions, gambling at horse races, and raising his family. All of these activities provided opportunities for entries into Johnson's journals. Anecdotes of parades, fires, natural disasters, and political rallies nestle among the humdrum accounts of business and jottings of daily events.

The diaries of William Johnson cover sixteen years of his life beginning in 1835 and ending with his death in 1851. These diaries were preserved by Johnson's descendents in the family home on State Street for decades. Finally, the Louisiana State University published the diaries in 1951 allowing a rare glimpse into the life of a free person of color through his own words. In addition to his diaries, a collection of family photos, business papers, account books, sheet music, books, and periodicals were preserved by the university.

### A Town Chronicler

Johnson spins lively tales of fistfights, horseraces, and town gossip. He creates comical characterizations of local townsfolk sometimes identified only as “Mr. McA,” “the Dutchman,” or even “the Snob.” The following excerpt from his diary describes Johnson's observations on the political fervor of the city during the election of 1840. The commotion of the rallies both perplexed and amused the diarist as he could not participate in politics as a free person of color. His animated depiction reveals his opinion of the frivolities:

*To Day is the First Day of the Presidential Election and*

*saw at One time 163 Persons Come in at One time in the Court House yard to vote, and they all were at that time Followers of the Tumble Bug Ball, properly named I think. The Ball was Rolled up and Down the Different streets, and then under the Hill, and up, and there was nothing wise about the Concern that I Could See...*

November 2, 1840

*The Election is still going on. The Greate Hum Bug Ball was stollen Last night by Some One that has more sense than the man that made it, and Demolished the thing, and rolled it Down the Bluff.*

November 3, 1840

Personal Reflections

Little in William Johnson’s diary provides the reader with insight into his personal feelings about warm family relationships, why he wrote a diary, or even his thoughts about slavery or race. An exception is Johnson’s discourse about “poor Steven,” a young, alcoholic slave who caused Johnson considerable strife. Steven’s disorderly behavior and frequent escapes caused Johnson to become increasingly harsh in doling out punishments. Eventually, under much distress, Johnson sold Steven away. His diary entry about the matter reveals Johnson’s conflicted feelings:

*I rested bad Last night. I had much Care On my mind, the night appeared very Long—I got up this morning Early and took Steven with me down to the Ferry Boat and gave him up to the Overseer of Young & Cannon...I felt hurt but Liquor is the Cause of his troubles; I would not have parted with Him if he had Only have let Liquor alone but he Cannot do it I believe.*

January 1, 1844

The Johnson House

William Johnson constructed a three-story brick structure on his mother-in-law's State Street property after an 1840 tornado destroyed much of downtown Natchez. In March 1841, Johnson moved his family into their new home upstairs above the commercial space at street level. His family continued to live in the house long after his 1851 death.

The Johnsons had a large household including William and his wife Ann, his mother-in-law Harriet Battles, ten growing children, and a handful of house slaves. Behind the home stood a two-story dependency which probably contained the family kitchen and dining rooms, as well as quarters for the servants. Also located on the lot

were a chicken coop , pig pen and kitchen gardens. Larger livestock including cows and horses were boarded across the street.

The house was purchased from the Johnson family heirs by the Preservation Society of Ellicott Hill who performed initial preservation and archeological study. The National Park Service acquired the Johnson property and the adjacent McCallum residence in 1990. The National Park Service did extensive historical research into the construction and original finishes as a guide to the restoration of the structure. Included in the restoration are many of the family's original furnishings.

Your visit to the William Johnson House

The William Johnson House is located in downtown Natchez, Mississippi at 210 State Street, one block east of South Canal Street.

The William Johnson House complex features a visitor center, public restrooms, bookstore located in the adjacent McCallum house, and a first floor exhibit rooms with interactive programs and universally accessible displays. The second floor living quarters is restored and furnished with many of the Johnson family’s original pieces. Special group and educational tours can be arranged by appointment.

Contact information:  
Natchez National Historical Park  
William Johnson House  
210 State Street  
Natchez, Mississippi 39120  
(601) 445-5345

Hours: Thursday –Sunday 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

